The Lyndon B. Johnson Administration's Interactions With Newsweek Regarding the USS Liberty Incident: A Case of Media Influence and Political Pressure

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Some events are remembered for what happened; others, for what was never allowed to be said. The assault on the USS Liberty in June 1967 killed thirty-four American sailors and nearly silenced their story forever. Within days, President Lyndon Johnson privately acknowledged what survivors already knew—that the attack bore the marks of intent. Yet when his words leaked, the response was swift and merciless. Israeli officials threatened to brand him with the charge of "blood libel," a smear powerful enough to cripple his reelection. Johnson's own intimates, men like Justice Abe Fortas and lawyer David Ginsburg, mobilized to shield Israel and mute the press. What followed was not the pursuit of truth but the quiet surrender of a magazine, the re-drafting of headlines, and the erasure of uncomfortable facts. In this crucible of power, influence, and intimidation, the truth of the Liberty was not only obscured—it was deliberately sunk.

Abstract

This article examines President Lyndon B. Johnson's off-the-record briefing to Newsweek following the 1967 Israeli attack on the USS Liberty, a U.S. Navy intelligence ship. Drawing on declassified documents, historical analyses, and survivor accounts, it explores allegations of deliberate intent behind the attack, LBJ's initial belief in Israeli culpability, and subsequent pressures that led to the modification of Newsweek's coverage. The analysis highlights themes of media suppression, geopolitical alliances during the Cold War, and the enduring controversy surrounding the incident. Implications for U.S.-Israel relations and government transparency are discussed.

Keywords: USS Liberty, Lyndon B. Johnson, Newsweek, media cover-up, Six-Day War, Israeli attack

Introduction

The attack on the USS Liberty during the Six-Day War on June 8, 1967, remains one of the most contentious events in U.S. naval history. Israeli forces assaulted the American intelligence-gathering vessel in international waters, resulting in 34 deaths and 171 injuries among U.S. personnel. Official narratives from both Israel and the U.S. government attributed the incident to mistaken identity amid the fog of war, with Israel mistaking the Liberty for an Egyptian ship. However, alternative accounts, including survivor testimonies and independent investigations, suggest the attack was deliberate, possibly to prevent the interception of sensitive Israeli communications.

Central to this controversy is President Lyndon B. Johnson's (LBJ) role, particularly his alleged involvement in recalling rescue aircraft and suppressing critical media coverage. This article focuses on LBJ's interactions with Newsweek, where he provided an off-the-record briefing suggesting the attack's intentional nature, only for the story to be "watered down" under external pressures. By analyzing declassified documents and historical scholarship, this piece elucidates how geopolitical considerations influenced media narratives and perpetuated a cover-up.

Background: The USS Liberty Incident and LBJ's Alleged Involvement

The USS Liberty, a technical research ship equipped for signals intelligence, was positioned off the Sinai Peninsula to monitor communications during the Six-Day War. Israeli jets and torpedo boats attacked the vessel, despite its clear U.S. markings and multiple reconnaissance overflights that should have identified it as American. The assault involved strafing, napalm, and torpedoes, lasting approximately 25-75 minutes. Israel promptly apologized, claiming mistaken identity, and compensated victims' families.

U.S. inquiries, including the Navy's Court of Inquiry, concluded it was an accident, but critics argue these were rushed and biased. Survivors reported jammed distress signals and deliberate targeting. LBJ's administration is accused of recalling Sixth Fleet rescue aircraft twice, allegedly to avoid confronting Israel. Affidavits from officials like Admiral Lawrence Geis claim LBJ personally intervened, stating he would not embarrass his ally. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara is said to have executed these orders. Motivations include Cold War alliances and domestic political pressures.

LBJ's Off-the-Record Briefing to Newsweek

Shortly after the attack, LBJ provided an off-the-record briefing to Newsweek, expressing his belief that the assault was deliberate. According to Tom Hughes, the State Department's director of intelligence and research, LBJ suggested the Israelis targeted the Liberty to prevent it from intercepting communications revealing Israel's initiation of hostilities. This view aligned with initial intelligence assessments.

The briefing leaked, alarming Israeli officials and prompting a swift response. Declassified Israeli documents reveal threats of accusing LBJ of "blood libel" and anti-Semitism, potentially derailing his 1968 reelection. Retired Admiral Bobby Ray Inman described this as "blackmail," noting implications for campaign funding from Jewish donors.

Pressures, Modifications, and the Watered-Down Story

Israeli officials hired lawyers, including LBJ's close friends like Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas and David Ginsburg, to pressure the administration and media. This "all-out offensive" aimed to "kill critical stories" and slant coverage favorably. Newsweek's planned article was significantly altered: the headline "Sinking the Liberty: Accident or Design?" included a question mark to introduce doubt; references to a "deliberate attack" were excised; and a commentary on the leak's purpose—to counter pro-Israeli pressures—was omitted.

The published piece in the June 19, 1967, issue presented a "top-level theory" of intentional sinking due to intercepted messages but noted not all officials accepted it. Declassified U.S. documents show Israeli Ambassador Avraham Harman confronting officials over the Newsweek item, citing "high officials" as sources for deliberate attack claims. Walt Rostow denied knowledge and promised press guidance. A Pentagon news ban further suppressed details.

Broader Implications and the Cover-Up

These interactions exemplify how political pressures shaped media narratives, prioritizing U.S.-Israel relations over transparency. The administration's acceptance of Israel's apology, despite contrary evidence, has fueled accusations of a cover-up. Survivors were gagged, and no full congressional investigation has occurred. This case underscores the interplay of domestic politics, foreign alliances, and media in historical events.

Conclusion

LBJ's briefing to Newsweek and the subsequent story modifications reveal a deliberate effort to mitigate fallout from the USS Liberty attack. While official accounts maintain the incident as accidental, evidence of pressure and suppression suggests otherwise. Future research should advocate for declassification to resolve lingering questions.

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